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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000255

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SUBJECT: FROM CHILD BRIDE TO SEX SLAVE: HOW MAURITANIAN
GIRLS ARE TRAFFICKED INTO SAUDI ARABIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) Summary: Reports of trafficking of Mauritanian child brides to Saudi Arabia are on the rise. The girls, usually between 5 and 12 years of age, are married off to wealthy Saudi men in exchange for hefty bride prices. Once they arrive in Saudi Arabia, they become sex slaves to their husbands. In 2008, the Association of Women Heads of Household -- a local NGO focused on women's rights -- provided support to 15 victims of trafficking. This year, between January and March, they have already tended to 11 cases. In response to this problem, Aminetou Mint El Moctar, president of the association, has single-handedly launched a campaign against trafficking. She wants to raise awareness among parents about the realities of child marriages to Saudi men as well as force the government to acknowledge and address the problem. UNICEF recognizes the problem and intends to address it in its next national study on child trafficking but it has not taken any concrete action. End summary.

THE CHILD BRIDE BUSINESS

12. (C) In a meeting April 7 with PolOff, Mint El Moctar denounced the traditional practice of child marriages as the main driver of trafficking. Traffickers approach poor and ignorant Mauritanian families about marrying their daughters to wealthy Saudi men. Hefty bride prices amounting to 5-6 million ouguiya (approximately \$20,000) and promises of better opportunities for the girls lure the families into accepting, says Mint El Moctar. The intermediaries are usually associated with local travel agencies, which Mint El Moctar says are in reality trafficking networks. The girls are taken to Saudi Arabia by a family member or by a travel agency designated "tutor." The agency intermediary gets a commission from the husband for striking the marriage deal -- amounts vary according to the girl's beauty and youth.

13. (C) Mint El Moctar stressed that once they arrive in Saudi Arabia, these child brides become sex slaves to their husbands. She explained that pre-pubescent girls are highly prized by Saudi men but, once they reach puberty or become

pregnant, they are of no further interest to their husbands. According to Mint El Moctar, the girls are then repudiated and thrown into the streets. Without a support network, they have no choice but to become prostitutes. Comment: PolOff had already heard reports of the sex slavery practice from Cy Lalla Aisha of human rights organization FONADH. Aisha told PolOff she had met a Mauritanian girl who had spent three years in Saudi Arabia locked up in a room without seeing anybody but her husband and a female servant who tended to her needs. The trafficking and abuses has also been denounced by Radio France International in a January 4 report that includes testimonies of Mulheri, a 7 year old girl trafficked to Saudi Arabia, and Aminetou who, upon her divorce, had to leave her children behind in Saudi Arabia. End comment.

TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN

¶4. (C) Mint El Moctar also denounced trafficking of adult women to Saudi Arabia for prostitution purposes. She said the travel agencies offer poor women to pay for their plane tickets and visa to look for work opportunities in Saudi Arabia. The women agree to reimburse the agency once they get to their destination. They are then forced to prostitute themselves to pay their debt. Mint Moctar said around thirty Mauritanian women have been convicted in Saudi Arabia for prostitution and are serving prison terms there. She stated these trafficking victims are punished for crimes they

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committed while being trafficked.

SEE NO EVIL, HEAR NO EVIL

¶5. (C) The Mauritanian government does not recognize trafficking as a problem, says Mint El Moctar. Articles 332 and 335 of the Penal Code have provisions against trafficking which are not enforced. Mint El Moctar recently sent a letter to High State Council President General Abdel Aziz to denounce government inaction but received no response. As a result, she started her own public awareness campaign and is fighting for the creation of a law project to criminalize and combat trafficking. Comment: In February 2009, PolOff met with a government representative in the Ministry of Justice who stated trafficking of Mauritanian women did not exist and trafficking to Saudi Arabia was not possible because there was a government law that required women to travel with a male family member. End comment.

¶6. (C) Mint El Moctar stressed that the court system puts all the blame on the girls that are victims of trafficking. She mentioned that a girl who dares denounce her trafficker is accused of being a depraved and sinful woman.

¶7. (C) Mint El Moctar stated she has received death threats for pushing the issue. She has been accused of being a liar, a madwoman, and a traitor who damages Mauritania's reputation.

¶8. (C) Mint El Moctar asked for the United States' help to raise awareness of this problem and to bring the issue to the United Nations. She thanked the United States for denouncing human rights violations through the Human Rights report and said this publication had been useful in confronting the Mauritanian authorities with traditionally taboo issues.

OTHER CONCERNS

¶9. (C) Mint El Moctar also expressed concern about a recent surge in child marriages in Mauritania. She explained that families are so worried about their daughters getting raped

or having sex before marriage, that they marry them as soon as they can to preserve their honor. (Note: Rape is a generalized problem in Mauritania that receives no government attention. Zeinebou Mint Taleb Moussa, president of the Mauritanian Association for the Health of Mother and Child (AMSME), said that in 2008 the center she supervises -- the only one providing services to victims of rape in Mauritania -- received 304 victims. She stated most victims do not seek help. The week of April 1, a center volunteer was raped and threatened for her affiliation to the center. End note.) According to Mint El Moctar, early marriages expose young girls to domestic violence, domestic servitude, and endangers their health. She introduced PolOff to a pregnant 12 year old girl who had already been married for three years and was regularly beaten by her husband. Comment: Again, these reports were confirmed by Cy Lalla Aisha from FONADH who told PolOff one of her clients was a 12 year old who almost died in childbirth. End comment.

UNICEF and UN Population Fund POINT OF VIEW

¶10. (C) Both UNICEF and the UN recognize the problem but stated they do not have the resources to take concrete actions. Mohamed Lemine Ahmed Seyfer, Protection Specialist at UNICEF Mauritania stated that the "trafficking of Mauritanian girls to Saudi Arabia is a recognized problem that has been signaled by many NGOs. He said that the Ministry of Women has recognized the problem and that UNICEF intends to approach this issue in its next national study on

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child trafficking. They also intend to work together with UNICEF Saudi Arabia. Seyfer requested United States funds to help accelerate actions against child trafficking in Mauritania. He said UNICEF is soliciting funds to send a joint UNICEF/Ministry of Women investigative mission to Saudi Arabia.

¶11. (C) Ahmed Salem Bouh, representative of the United Nations Population Fund, said that the United Nations has been working in close collaboration with the government in the fight against child marriage and women's rights in general. Nevertheless, even though they worked with the government to pass law's against child marriage they don't have specific programs to curtail the trafficking of Mauritanian girls to Saudi Arabia.

¶11. (C) Comment: Trafficking, the corollary of poverty and traditional practices harmful to women, is one of many taboos in Mauritanian society. NGOs like Mint El Moctar's wage a lone battle without resources or recognition. The coup d'etat is likely to make their quest even more difficult. As the United States seeks to support democratic forces in Mauritania, it should put an emphasis on increasing these NGO's capacity to denounce and fight human rights abuses as well as provide support to victims. With their "in your face approach" towards the government, their capacity to undertake concrete actions and mobilize the population at the grassroots level, and their desire to fight against all odds for a more democratic society -- even at the expense of their reputation and personal safety -- human rights activists like Mint El Moctar are among our best partners in democracy. End comment.

HANKINS